DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 468 249 SP 041 007

AUTHOR	Symeou, Loizos
TITLE	Home-School Liaisons in Cyprus: An Investigation of Teachers' and Parents' Views of Current Realities and Future Needs.
PUB DATE	2002-04-00
NOTE	29p.
PUB TYPE	Numerical/Quantitative Data (110) -- Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary Education; *Family School Relationship; Foreign Countries; Parent Attitudes; *Parent Teacher Cooperation; Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS	*Cyprus

ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from a nationwide survey of Cyprus' elementary school teachers and families regarding home-school liaisons. Data analysis reveals that both teachers and families feel that currently implemented practices linking home and school in Cyprus are restricted. At the same time, they express a need to modify their relationships, even though their suggestions still imply low levels of family involvement. Both parents and teachers agree on the utility of further informing families about general educational and pedagogical issues and on the importance of opening the class and the school to families in order to provide them with a first-hand view of the work done within the school. Families, however, prioritize receiving immediate and direct information about their own children, something that teachers do not appear willing to further pursue. The analysis also indicates that the nature and extent of family-school liaisons in Cyprus primary schools might differ according to a number of external variables relating to the school and teaching context, as well as to some demographic characteristics of teachers and families. Findings are discussed within the context of efforts to introduce innovation and change into Cyprus' educational system. (Contains 58 references.) (SM)

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ED 468 249

Home-School Liaisons in Cyprus: An Investigation of Teachers' and Parents' Views of Current Realities and Future Needs

Loizos Symeou

2002

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PAPER FOR AERA'S ANNUAL MEETING 2002
SIG: Family, School, Community Partnership
New Orleans, April 5th

Title:
Home-School liaisons in Cyprus: An investigation of teachers' and parents' views of current realities and future needs.

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Abstract
Home-school liaisons in Cyprus have not yet been systematically studied. This paper presents the main findings of a nation-wide questionnaire survey, which investigated the issue among teachers and families in Cyprus primary state schools. Teachers' and families' perspectives on how these relationships are currently implemented are identified, as well as their views on whether, and if so how, these liaisons need to be transformed.

Data analysis revealed that both teachers and families consider that currently implemented practices linking home and school in Cyprus are restricted. At the same time, they express a need to modify their relationships, even though their suggestions still imply mild modes of family involvement, and not broader levels of participation. More specifically, both consent to the utility of further informing the families on general educational and pedagogical issues, as well as to the opening of the class and the school to families in order to provide them a first-hand experience of the work done behind school rails. Families, however, set as their initial priority their immediate and direct information about their own child, something that teachers do not appear willing to further pursue. The analysis also indicated that the nature and the extent of family-school liaisons in Cyprus primary schools might differentiate according to a number of external variables, relating to the school and teaching context, as well as to some demographic characteristics of teachers and families. The findings are discussed within the current context of vivid surge within the Cyprus educational system for the introduction of relevant innovation and change.

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HOME-SCHOOL LIAISONS IN CYPRUS: AN INVESTIGATION OF TEACHERS' AND PARENTS' VIEWS OF CURRENT REALITIES AND FUTURE NEEDS.

I. Introduction

During the last few decades in many educational systems, a high degree of attention has been drawn to the relationships between schools and their environments, particularly the pupils' homes. Theorists, researchers, and practitioners portrayed this relationship as a significant determinant of the quality of education provided, thus asserting the value of family and school not only being in an agreement, but also establishing strong, positive, communicative relationships between them in order to collaborate. Correspondingly, lively efforts are currently directed to bring the two agents closer by opening the school to pupils' families and improve home-school contacts and relationships. Hence, families are considered more than ever before -at least at a broad theoretical level- as having the right to be involved in school enterprises.

The main factor that contributed to this shift was the recognition in the mid 60s that a child's in-school attainment is likely to depend on the social, cultural, and learning experiences, attitudes and aspirations of the child's home background (Bernstein, 1975; Bloom, 1982; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Davis, 1991), what has been called, the 'curriculum of the home' (Coleman, 1998). As Bloom (1982) indicated after reviewing both separate national studies of education in seven countries as well as international studies involving twenty-two nations, the home environment is the most powerful factor in determining the level of a child's school achievement by accounting for more of the student variation in learning than other factors, including the school curriculum, the quality of instruction in schools, the differences among teachers and the differences among schools. Schooling is thus viewed as providing educational opportunities and achieving its aims only insofar as what it offers builds on, and directly engages with, the fundamental education and 'curriculum' which the child experiences at home.

Many changes in the broader international historical, political and economical context have also contributed to this opening of the school to families. The establishment of democracy, the accountability movement, the notion of equal opportunity, the decentralisation/devolution trend and the debate regarding the issue of responsibility in educating children, have all been cited as underpinning the surge for opening school doors to families (Turney, Ellis, Towler, & Wright, 1990; Jowett, Baginsky, & McNeil, 1991; Tomlinson, 1991; O'Connor, 1994; Bourmina, 1995; Knight, 1995; Davies & Johnson, 1996). Under the influence of these different notions and movements, and in a series of educational reforms within different educational systems, parents have correspondingly been profiled as 'clients', 'customers', and 'educational consumers', as well as 'decision-makers', 'managers' and 'governors'.

The rubrics 'parental involvement' and 'parental participation' in school have been used by the international literature interchangeably in order to describe a broad spectrum of practices aiming at bringing schools closer to pupils' families. Nonetheless, the two terms can usefully be distinguished as referring to two different concepts. Parental 'involvement' refers to procedures which allow parents to have a role in what is happening in the school, but where the nature and extent of this role is

predetermined by the professional staff of the school, the teachers. Parents' role is confined in most cases to being spectators of events or activities which schools do for parents (Tomlinson, 1991; Davies & Johnson, 1996), or of activities that can be described as 'parental duties' (Vir ing, 1997) or 'voluntary labour' (Reeve, 1993). Parental 'involvement' practices are more likely to concern mainly the well being of the parent's own child (Munn, 1993). The term 'participation' would rather signal a shift to a broader and different range of relationships between families and schools in both content and intent, in a way that both 'parties' share responsibility and authority on a continuous basis. Rights and responsibilities in this case are defined, roles, procedures and joint accountabilities clarified, and policies negotiated. The road towards 'participation' is more likely to presuppose a formal revitalisation of the administration and operation of schooling through procedures that allow parents to take an active part and a full-scale participation in school governorship and decision-making at all educational levels (Stapes & Morris 1993; Soliman, 1995). The 'participation' shift places parents explicitly within the decision-making for the collective well being of the whole school and all the children in it (Munn, 1993).

When family-school relationships reach the level of participation, one can refer to a 'partnership'. Martin, Ranson, and Tall (1997) propose a four-stage development model of family-school links, which provides a more exhaustive description of how involvement can evolve to an interactive partnership between families and schools. The first stage is defined as the stage of 'dependence' in family-school relationships. Families at this stage are passive and deferential in the face of teachers' professional knowledge and training. The second stage is 'membership', where families begin to be consulted about changes and their views are listened to, whereas the third stage is 'interaction', whereby the active participation of families in the life of the school is expected and encouraged, and families are valued as co-educators. The last and highest stage is 'partnership', where School Board members, families and teachers enter into a public partnership, which holds them jointly responsible for the governance and development of the school. Macbeth (1989) had earlier called schools of the first stage as 'self-contained' schools, those of the second as schools under 'professional uncertainty', those of the third as schools of 'growing confidence', whereas schools at the last stage as schools having 'a concordat' of mutual commitment with their pupils' families.

The inconsistency and the discrepancy in the language used among researchers, theorists, and practitioners in the area of family-school liaisons (in particular, the vagueness in the definition, the characteristics and the use of the notions of family/parental 'involvement' and 'participation'), and contextual and geographic differences in the implementation of relevant innovations, has resulted in a vivid debate regarding their impact on schooling. Instrumentation differences between the various studies have additionally made it extremely difficult to determine whether findings supporting specific impacts, or the lack of them, reflect valid measurements or are merely an artifact of these different approaches. Nonetheless, there is currently a widely accepted agreement among researchers that a school culture which supports active family engagement in the school, accompanied by an active engagement of the family, can bring about improvement in children's school performance and attainment, especially in primary school (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Henderson, 1987; Stevenson & Baker, 1987; Epstein, 1987; 1992; 1995; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Connors & Epstein, 1995; Benito & Filp, 1996; Krumm, 1996; Georgiou, 1997; Bee,

2000). Strong family-school links have also been suggested to improve general teacher functioning (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Epstein, 1986; 1992; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987; Reeve, 1993), increase parental confidence and self-efficacy, enhance parental motivation to resume their own education (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Davies, 1988), and augment a general family and community support for the schools (Epstein, 1992; Townsend, 1995). Finally, active family-school liaisons have been cited as one of the prerequisites for school effectiveness (Bell, 1993; Hopkins, Ainscow, & West, 1994; O'Connor, 1994; Sammons, Hillman, & Mortimore, 1995; Townsend, 1995; Coleman, 1998; Pasiardis, 1998).

Simultaneously though, much of this research has been accused of generalising its findings without taking into consideration that, in practice, it is not all families that have strong relationships with their children's schools. Comparing demographic characteristics, research documents that higher-income and better-educated families are more in contact with schools than their counterparts. Thus, lower socioeconomic status (SES) families are consistently found to be less commonly involved in schools and to have obstacles in getting involved in specific activities (Finders and Lewis, 1994; Vincent, 1996; Reay, 1998; Lareau, 2000). Moreover, within families, mothers seem to get involved more than fathers in matters relating to the child's schooling, not only because they choose to do so, but sometimes because they are 'appointed' to such a role. Connection with school is, thus, presented as a female 'brief' and men are described as maintaining a greater distance from schools (Blackmore, 1995; Reay, 1998; Phtiaka, 1998; Lareau, 2000). Recent changes in family characteristics may change however this pattern, as surveys suggest that the 'fatherhood movement' is gaining strength, leading to an increased 'male involvement' in schools (Turner, 1997). Simultaneously, the increasing full-time employment of mothers has recently led to a substantial decline in the total number of families able to be involved (Katz, 1994).

Correspondingly, a great debate in the international literature is identified regarding the applicability of the positive outcomes of involvement or participation programs on *all* students. Fears are expressed that attempts which aim at bringing family and school closer may widen rather than narrow the gaps, especially between socially and economically deprived children and other children. Therefore, even the most ardent proponents of initiatives engaging families in their children's schooling, admit that benefits occur only when parents are "aware, knowledgeable, encouraging and involved" (Epstein, 1992, p. 1141) and that the comparison has to be at the intra-class and background level and between children of similar aptitude (Henderson, 1987; Luster & McAdoo, 1996; Steinberg 1996; Vincent, 1996)[1].

In the case of Cyprus, there is an indication that the relationships between the parents and the school are limited (Georgiou, 1996; Phtiaka, 1996). The extent and nature of these relationships in Cyprus seem to depend on how inviting the school itself is and on parents' initiatives as individuals. Indicative of the extent of the lack of substantial relationships between families and schools is the lack of any recent legislative action in relation to the issue. Moreover, due to the dominant attitudes of the main

[1] Even though, these findings tend to be reasonably consistent internationally, they should not be generalised across very different national cultures and educational systems, given that there has been very much more relevant research in some countries than in others.

stakeholders and the specific educational context, only a few research attempts aiming at exploring the implementation of relevant innovation have been reported (Georgiou, 1998; Kyriakides, 1999, Symeou, 2002).

II. The research purpose

The present paper describes the main findings of a nation-wide survey study, which aimed at investigating home-school liaisons in primary state schools in Cyprus. More specifically, it identifies current practices in home-school liaisons, as described by teachers and parents, and explores their accounts on whether, and if so how, their liaisons need to be transformed. Additionally it draws conclusions on the current content and extent of these relationships between different sub-groups within the two populations. Finally, by incorporating their general suggestions, ideas, needs, and reservations, the study tries to propose a framework for future innovations in the field of home-school liaisons in Cyprus. The research questions of this study are as follows:

- Which are the current most common practices linking families and school in Cyprus state primary schools?
- How do various sub-groups within the teachers' and families' populations differ in their existing practices?
- Do families and teachers express a need for modifying their existing relationships in their specific context, and what are their suggestions for pursuing this?

Due to the nation-wide scope of this study and the relative paucity of previous research in the area of home-school liaisons in Cyprus, the study is extremely important in the Cyprus educational context. Moreover, within the current Cyprus context of vivid surge for the introduction of relevant innovation and change, it is of extreme significance to investigate teachers' perspectives and reveal their conceptual models in relation to the issue before their engagement in any such attempt (Fullan, 1991; Hargreaves, 1994). Similarly, the investigation of families' accounts would be fundamental prior to their own participation in such a process and a prerequisite of the success of any future relevant innovation.

At another broader level, in the international context where home-school relations appear prominently on the agendas of policy-makers, educators, and parents, the outcomes of the research would constitute a reference for the current realities concerning the issue in Cyprus. As Davies and Johnson (1996) suggest, such attempts can contribute to the international exchange of ideas and practices in the area of family-school relationships across national boundaries.

III. Methodology

The sample

In order to investigate the research questions, a questionnaire survey was conducted among a random sample of the teachers and the families of Cyprus state primary schools. The selection of the two samples was based on a multi-staged proportionate stratified process. During an initial stratification, schools were randomly selected among the strata created by the classification of the schools according to their location (urban, semi-urban, and rural schools) and their size (small schools with less than 80

pupils, average schools with 81 to 200 students, and large schools with 201 pupils or more).

In order to select the teachers' sample, the personnel of the initially selected schools were stratified and randomly selected according to the grade level they were teaching. Certain criteria were set for determining the number of teachers that would be chosen from each school: for schools of the sample with up to 6 classes and below 80 pupils *one* teacher was selected; for schools with up to 10 classes and over 80 pupils *two* teachers were selected; and for schools with 11 classes or more *three* teachers were selected. Finally, within the classes of the teachers' sample, one family was randomly selected from the total population of the class's families. For the selection of the specific family that would participate in the sample, a random selection from each class's alphabetical registrar took place according to the child's gender, in an attempt to have an equal number of families who had a boy and a girl in school.

A total of 348 teachers (13.46% of the whole population of teachers who had the responsibility of a specific class during that school year), and 348 family members (0.58% of the whole population) from 173 schools (out of an overall population of 343 Cyprus state primary schools), was the final sample of the research.

The response rate was 77.01% for the teachers' sample, and 75.57% for the families' sample. Nearly two- third of the respondents (60.2%) were representing schools located in average socio-economics status (SES) areas, 31.9% schools in low SES areas, and the remaining 8% schools in high SES areas. A percentage of 54.5% of the respondents' schools were in rural areas, 18.9% in semi-urban areas, and 26.6% in urban areas. One-fourth (25.2%) of the respondents were representing small schools, 33.5% average size schools and 41.3% large schools.

The following table illustrates the demographic characteristics of the teachers that responded to the questionnaire.

TABLE 1
Teachers' demographic characteristics

Personal characteristics	Demographic groups	%
Gender	Male	22.59
	Female	77.40
Educational background	Pedagogical Academy degree	8.3
	University degree	85.3
	Postgraduate degree	6.4
Teaching experience	Up to 15 years	72.9
	16-25 years	14.7
	26 or more years	12.4
Grade level	Lower grades (grades 1 and 2)	34.6
	Middle grades (grades 3 and 4)	35.7
	Upper grades (grades 5 and 6)	29.7

Families' respondents, who, according to the questionnaire's requirements should be those who take the most responsibility in their child's day-to-day schooling, were in their vast majority mothers (71%). Only 21% of the respondents were fathers.

The research instrument

In order to achieve the research objectives and to answer the research questions, two separate questionnaires were constructed, one for each population. For the questionnaires' construction, other questionnaires used in similar international studies were consulted, accompanied by pilot interviews with a sample of parents and teachers who offered more context-specific information regarding the issue in investigation. The initial versions of the two questionnaires were pre-tested in order to isolate problems of design, test their efficiency in giving the expected information, and introduce improvements to the enquiry. Additionally, before the actual survey took place from March to May 2000, the two questionnaires were piloted with an analogous sample to the main survey's sample to try out the various features of the main enquiry and gather information about the characteristics of the non-response stratum in order to improve the response rate during the actual survey.

Both questionnaires had the same structure. In their first section, they enquired as to the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Their other two sections were presenting a same list of 23 practices under a separate introductory question inquiring from the respondents to indicate, in the first case, the incidence of these practices in their school during that specific school–year (1999-2000), and, in the second, their desire for these practices to be further pursued during the following school-year. Each practice in both sections was presented in a structured ordinal coding. Each section also provided space for respondents to add their own practices, experiences or thoughts regarding the respective introductory question.

The questionnaires were sent via mail to the schools' administrators, who circulated them to the indicated teachers and families, and were returned back again though the schools' administrators. For the analysis of the gathered data, which involved both descriptive and inferential analysis, the statistical package SPSS was used.

IV. Results

Current realities

Table 2 presents the main findings from the analysis of teachers' and families' responses to the question inquiring from respondents to indicate the incidence of the 23 practices in their school during the school–year 1999-2000. To facilitate the discussion, the table presents only the findings discussed here. Findings are presented in a mean rank descending order, i.e. from practises found to be more frequent to those practised less.

As the table demonstrates, both teachers and parents validate that the most frequent practises in Cyprus primary schools is for teachers to provide their pupils' parents with information; in particular, to inform parents about their child's achievement and behaviour at school, how children should study at home, and how to work at school. Simultaneously, teachers and families confirm that the practices that seem to be more rarely established are for families to be invited to help during a class session or to attend events or gatherings in their child's class, as also families to be surveyed for their perceptions about their child's class or school, and to be encouraged to offer voluntary help in the class or the school.

TABLE 2

Frequency of the current implementation of specific practices

Practice	Scale	Teachers' F	Teacher's %	Parents' F	Parents' %
Oral information to a parent about the child's school achievement	Many times	243	90	147	55.9
	Sometimes	22	8.1	83	31.6
	Once or twice	3	1.1	21	8
	Never	0	0	0	0
Oral information to a parent about the child's behaviour at school	Many times	219	81.1	118	44.9
	Sometimes	37	13.7	86	32.7
	Once or twice	11	4.1	35	13.3
	Never	1	0.4	14	5.3
Oral information to a parent regarding how children should study at home	Many times	189	70	70	26.6
	Sometimes	66	24.4	81	30.8
	Once or twice	14	5.2	58	22.1
	Never	1	0.4	45	17.1
Oral information to a parent regarding how children should work at school	Many times	152	56.3	57	21.7
	Sometimes	100	37	83	31.6
	Once or twice	16	5.9	61	23.2
	Never	2	0.7	53	20.2
A parent to be asked to inform the teacher about his/her child's needs	Many times	87	32.2	7	2.7
	Sometimes	110	40.7	20	7.6
	Once or twice	63	23.3	38	14.4
	Never	8	3	187	71.1
The teacher to phone to a pupil's home	Many times	43	15.9	8	3
	Sometimes	106	39.3	14	5.3
	Once or twice	76	28.1	44	16.7
	Never	40	14.8	186	70.7
The teacher to send to a pupil's home a notice concerning a particular child	Many times	46	17	10	3.8
	Sometimes	101	37.4	25	9.5
	Once or twice	72	26.7	32	12.2
	Never	51	18.9	179	68.1
The teacher to ask families to assist with school or classroom maintenance	Many times	3	1.1	7	2.7
	Sometimes	12	4.4	14	5.3
	Once or twice	53	19.6	26	9.9
	Never	201	74.4	201	76.4
The teacher to ask families to assist with student supervision on class trips, student performances, or sport events	Many times	2	0.7	2	0.8
	Sometimes	5	1.9	7	2.7
	Once or twice	43	15.9	23	8.7
	Never	218	80.7	216	82.1
The teacher to survey parents for their perceptions about the class or the school	Many times	2	0.7	2	0.8
	Sometimes	12	4.4	12	4.6
	Once or twice	20	7.4	18	6.8
	Never	234	86.7	215	81.7
The teacher to organise a lesson for parents to help during the class	Many times			2	0.8
	Sometimes	7	2.6	4	1.5
	Once or twice	18	6.7	3	1.1
	Never	243	90	238	90.5

The stress put on the importance of the exchange of information between teachers and families for the children's benefit is also reinforced by the fact that, according to the former, teachers ask parents often to inform them about their child's needs, call families about an issue relevant to their child, and send families notices when there is a need to communicate with the parent. Given the descriptive consensus on the other practices, the apparent discrepancies between families' and teachers' responses in the latter cases, can be easily understood and justified if we consider that what may actually be quite common in teachers' lives can quite understandably be very uncommon in the average parent s life due to the number of pupils. It might moreover, indicate that it is only some families that witness such a treatment, something which is investigated below.

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Differences in current priorities within different sub-groups of the populations

In order to investigate differences in the ways these relationships are currently set up in different teaching and family contexts, the non-parametric tests for independent samples Mann-Whitney U rank sum and Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance were conducted. The analysis revealed a number of significant differences relating to the way teachers and families with different characteristics currently establish or experience home-school links.

- *Differences between current practices of sub-groups of teachers*

The Kruskal-Wallis analysis of teachers' responses revealed that teachers at schools of different SES catchment areas differ in the frequency they engage into a number of specific practices. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons using Mann-Whitney, indicated that it is teachers at schools in high SES catchment areas that practice more frequently these practices than their colleagues at schools in average and low SES catchment areas.

TABLE 3

Statistically significant differences between teachers' practices in schools in different SES catchment area

Statement During the current school year I have...	Independent variable		N	Mean rank	Chi-square	df	p
Provided a parent with information on how children should study at home	School's catchment area	School with a high SES*	25	164.88	9.165	2	0.010
		School with an average SES	158	136.10			
		School with a low SES	85	122.59			
		Total	268				
Invited a parent to talk to the pupils for a topic relevant to our lessons	School's catchment area	School with a high SES*	25	168.14	7.840	2	0.020
		School with an average SES	157	130.23			
		School with a low SES	85	130.92			
		Total	267				
Organised a workshop/seminar for the parents of my classroom on how parents should help their children with their schooling	School's catchment area	School with a high SES*	25	160.46	7.157	2	0.028
		School with an average SES	158	135.97			
		School with a low SES	83	120.67			
		Total	266				

*Mann-Whitney post hoc pairwise comparisons demonstrated a significant difference between this sub-group and the others.

As demonstrated in Table 3, teachers at schools in high SES catchment areas were found to provide families more information about their child's study habits, to utilise more parental expertise in their teaching schedule, and offer more opportunities for training workshops relating to their children's schooling than teachers at schools in average and low SES catchment areas.

Teachers of schools located in different areas were also found to differ in the frequency they engage into specific practices. The Kruskal-Wallis analysis and the Munn-Whitney post-hoc pairwise comparisons of teachers' responses indicated that teachers at rural schools are those that establish these practices more than their colleagues in urban and semi-urban areas.

TABLE 4

Statistically significant differences between teachers' practices according to schools' location

Statement During the current school-year I have...	Independent variable		N	Mean rank	Chi-square	df	p
Sent to pupils' families of my class a notice/letter which concerned the families and which I have written	School's location	Urban school	85	121.32	11.799	2	0.003
		Semi-urban school	60	117.43			
		Rural school*	122	150.98			
		Total	267				
Organised in my classroom a morning event or gathering at which I invited the parents of my class	School's location	Urban school	86	117.13	9.206	2	0.01
		Semi-urban school*	59	141.57			
		Rural school*	122	142.23			
		Total	267				
Organised a workshop/seminar for the parents of my classroom on how parents should help their children with their schooling	School's location	Urban school	86	122.41	11.709	2	0.003
		Semi-urban school	59	117.93			
		Rural school*	121	148.98			
		Total	266				
Asked families to assist with student supervision on class trips, student performances, or sport events	School's location	Urban school	86	122.33	14.868	2	0.001
		Semi-urban school	59	122.08			
		Rural school*	121	147.01			
		Total	266				
Visited a pupil's home	School's location	Urban school	85	121.88	8.624	2	0.013
		Semi-urban school	59	120.53			
		Rural school*	121	146.89			
		Total	265				

*Mann-Whitney post hoc pairwise comparisons demonstrated a significant difference between this sub-group and the others.

As indicated in the above table, teachers at rural schools send more written notices to their pupils' families, invite more families to attend school events and training workshops, ask more parental assistance for pupils' supervision, and visit more frequently their pupils' homes.

Another variable that seems to introduce differences in the incidence of specific practices is the school size. The Kruskal-Wallis analysis and the Munn-Whitney post-hoc pairwise comparisons showed that teachers at schools with a small number of pupils ask significantly more families' voluntary assistance and survey them more regarding their perceptions about the school than teachers at larger schools (Table 5).

TABLE 5
Statistically significant differences between teachers' practices according to the schools' size

Statement During the current school-year I have...	Independent variable		N	Mean rank	Chi-square	df	p
Organised a workshop/ seminar for the parents of my classroom on parenting skills	**School's size**	Small schools *	36	149.94	8.121	2	0.017
		Average schools	85	139.02			
		Large schools	148	129.05			
		Total	269				
Asked families to assist with school or classroom maintenance	**School's size**	Small schools *	36	155.53	6.151	2	0.046
		Average schools	86	126.48			
		Large schools	147	134.96			
		Total	269				
Asked families to assist with student supervision on class trips, student performances, or sport events	**School's size**	Small schools*	36	180.47	32.102	2	0.000
		Average schools	84	129.04			
		Large schools	148	126.42			
		Total	268				
Surveyed parents for their perceptions about my class or school	**School's size**	Small schools*	36	155.39	9.560	2	0.008
		Average schools	84	128.46			
		Large schools	148	132.84			
		Total	268				

*Mann-Whitney post hoc pairwise compar sons demonstrated a significant difference between this sub-group and the others.

The statistical analysis indicated also that specific personal characteristics of the teachers seem to differentiate the way teachers set up their connections with their pupils' parents. Teacher's gender was the variable that presented the most differences in the incidence specific practices are currently used. When the Mann-Whitney test was applied, it revealed that in all cases, female teachers were more likely to engage in the particular practices than their male counterparts (Table 6).

TABLE 6

Statistically significant differences between teachers' practices according to gender

Statement During the current school-year I have...	Independent variable		N	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	U	p
Provided a parent with information on how children should study at home	Teacher's gender	Male	61	118.83	7248.50	5357.50	0.03
		Female*	205	138.49	28529.5		
		Total	266				
Informed a parent when we met about the child's behaviour at school	Teacher's gender	Male	61	120.67	7361.00	5470.00	0.034
		Female*	204	136.69	27884.0		
		Total	265				
Sent a report to pupils' homes informing them about the child's progress and needs	Teacher's gender	Male	61	113.94	6950.00	5059.50	0.018
		Female*	205	139.32	28560.0		
		Total	266				
Sent to pupils' families of my class a notice/letter which concerned the families and which I have written	Teacher's gender	Male	61	108.77	6635.00	4744.00	0.003
		Female*	205	140.86	28876.0		
		Total	266				
Sent to a pupil's home a notice concerning only that particular child	Teacher's gender	Male	61	110.37	6732.5	4841.50	0.005
		Female*	206	141.00	29045.5		
		Total	267				
Organised in my classroom a morning event or gathering at which I invited the parents of my class	Teacher's gender	Male	61	116.57	7111.00	5220.00	0.016
		Female*	205	138.54	28400.0		
		Total	266				
Asked a parent of my class to inform me about his/her child's needs	Teacher's gender	Male	61	107.83	6577.50	4686.50	0.002
		Female*	204	140.53	2867.50		
		Total	265				
Arranged a special meeting with a parent in order to discuss with her/him a matter concerning their child	Teacher's gender	Male	61	114.67	6995.00	5104.00	0.026
		Female*	204	138.48	28250.0		
		Total	265				
Phoned to a pupil's home	Teacher's gender	Male	60	112.57	6754.50	4924.50	0.021
		Female*	202	137.12	27698.5		
		Total	262				
Sent parents a report on the specific aims of a particular period to inform them about what children are going to be taught during that period	Teacher's gender	Male	61	113.88	6946.50	5055.50	0.011
		Female*	204	138.72	28298.5		
		Total	265				

*The Mann-Whitney comparison demonstrated a significant difference between this sub-group and the other.

Grade level was also found to differentiate participants' responses. The analysis of teachers' responses revealed that teachers teaching at the lower grades of primary school, are more likely to utilise more some types of written communication than teachers teaching at the middle and upper grades, such as sending their pupils' families informative letters or reports regarding their child and their teaching aims, (Table 7).

TABLE 7

Statistically significant differences between teachers' practices according to grade levels

Statement During the current school-year I have...	Independent variable		N	Mean rank	Chi-square	df	p
Sent a report to pupils' homes informing them about the child's progress and needs	**Grade level**	Grades 1 and 2*	93	153.60	9.684	2	0.008
		Grades 3 and 4	96	126.89			
		Grades 5 and 6	79	121.26			
		Total	268				
Sent to pupils' families of my class a notice/letter which concerned the families	**Grade level**	Grades 1 and 2 *	93	177.88	49.924	2	0.00
		Grades 3 and 4	96	118.40			
		Grades 5 and 6	79	102.99			
		Total	268				
Sent parents a report on the specific aims of a particular period to inform them about what children are going to be taught	**Grade level**	Grades 1 and 2 *	92	165.18	29.281	2	0.00
		Grades 3 and 4	96	120.76			
		Grades 5 and 6	80	115.70			
		Total	268				

*Mann-Whitney post hoc pairwise comparisons demonstrated a significant difference between this sub-group and the others.

The class size was revealed to be another significant variant. As presented in Table 8, teachers who are responsible for classes with a small number of pupils, tend to send families more often written notices, ask more parental assistance for pupils' supervision during class events, and survey families more for their perceptions regarding class-work. At the same time, teachers with an average or large number of pupils tend to provide families more frequently with oral information regarding their child's school work, and teachers of the larger size classes appear to utilise parental expertise more frequently than their counterparts.

TABLE 8

Statistically significant differences between teachers' practices according to class size

Statement During the current school-year I have...	Independent variable		N	Mean rank	Chi-square	df	p
Provided a parent with information on how children should work at school	Number of pupils in the class	Up to 15 pupils	44	111.07	6.941	2	0.031
		From 16 to 25 pupils*	128	142.39			
		26 pupils or more*	96	134.72			
		Total	268				
Provided a parent with information on how children should study at home	Number of pupils in the class	Up to 15 pupils	44	108.57	9.245	2	0.01
		From 16 to 25 pupils*	128	140.34			
		26 pupils or more*	96	138.59			
		Total	268				
Sent to pupils' families of my class a notice/letter which concerned the families and which I have written	Number of pupils in the class	Up to 15 pupils*	44	145.39	10.101	2	0.006
		From 16 to 25 pupils*	128	144.54			
		26 pupils or more	95	114.53			
		Total	267				
Invited a parent to talk to the pupils for a topic relevant to our lessons	Number of pupils in the class	Up to 15 pupils	44	130.69	8.645	2	0.013
		From 16 to 25 pupils	128	123.88			
		26 pupils or more*	95	149.17			
		Total	267				
Asked families to assist with student supervision on class trips, student performances, or sport events	Number of pupils in the class	Up to 15 pupils*	43	152.44	7.879	2	0.019
		From 16 to 25 pupils	128	134.18			
		26 pupils or more	96	125.50			
		Total	267				
Surveyed parents for their perceptions about my class or school	Number of pupils in the class	Up to 15 pupils*	43	148.88	6.173	2	0.046
		From 16 to 25 pupils	128	129.66			
		26 pupils or more	96	133.13			
		Total	267				

*Mann-Whitney post hoc pairwise comparisons demonstrated a significant difference between this sub-group and the others.

Teachers of a different educational background were also found to differ in the frequency they engage in specific practices. In this case, the comparison was between responses of teachers with a three-year diploma of a pedagogical academy, four-year university degree graduates, and postgraduate degree holders. The analysis revealed, in all four cases, a statistical significance between the latter group and their

colleagues. As Table 9 demonstrates, postgraduate degree holders are more likely to engage more in organising events for parents, surveying parental needs, visiting pupils homes, and sending families class-newsletters than their colleagues.

TABLE 9
Statistically significant differences between teachers' practices according to teachers' educational background

Statement During the current school-year I have...	Independent variable		N	Mean rank	Chi-square	df	p
Organised in my classroom a morning event or gathering at which I invited the parents of my class	**Teachers' professional studies**	Pedagogical Academy	22	143.77	13.141	2	0.001
		University	229	129.79			
		Postgraduate*	17	185.88			
		Total	268				
Asked a parent of my class to inform me about his/her child's needs	**Teachers' professional studies**	Pedagogical Academy	22	115.70	6.264	2	0.044
		University	228	132.89			
		Postgraduate*	17	172.62			
		Total	267				
Visited a pupil's home	**Teachers' professional studies**	Pedagogical Academy	22	107.27	6.021	2	0.049
		University	227	133.81			
		Postgraduate*	17	163.26			
		Total	266				
Sent to pupils' homes a class newsletter or a bulletin	**Teachers' professional studies**	Pedagogical Academy	22	125.64	12.442	2	0.002
		University	225	129.05			
		Postgraduate*	16	182.28			
		Total	263				

*Mann-Whitney post hoc pairwise comparisons demonstrated a significant difference between this sub-group and the others.

- *Differences in current experiences of different sub-groups of families*

The analysis indicated that the only family demographic characteristic that might introduce particular differences in the way different families currently experience their links with their child's teachers, is the family's participation in the school's Parents' Association (PA). The independent samples Mann-Whitney test revealed that families that are represented in their child's school PA are likely to receive in a considerable number of occasions more calls from their child's teacher to engage in school activities comparing to families that are not represented in their school's PA.

TABLE 10

Statistically significant differences between families' involvement according to families' participation in the school's PA

Statement During the current school-year my child's teachers or school have...	Independent variable		N	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	U	p
Informed me when we met about the child's academic achievement	The respondent is a member of the child's school Parent Association	No	203	119.85	24329.5	3623.5	0.045
		Yes*	43	140.73	6051.5		
		Total	246				
Sent home a notice concerning the child when there was need	The respondent is a member of the child's school Parent Association	No	199	116.14	23112.5	3212.5	0.003
		Yes*	42	144.01	6048.5		
		Total	241				
Invited me to a morning event in the child's classroom	The respondent is a member of the child's school Parent Association	No	202	118.36	23909.0	3406.0	0.006
		Yes*	43	144.79	6226.0		
		Total	245				
Invited me to a morning event in the school where all school families were invited	The respondent is a member of the child's school Parent Association	No	200	118.25	23651.0	3551.0	0.04
		Yes*	43	139.42	5995.0		
		Total	243				
Asked families to assist with school maintenance	The respondent is a member of the child's school Parent Association	No	199	116.71	23224.5	3324.5	0.00
		Yes*	44	145.94	6421.5		
		Total	143				
Asked families to assist with student supervision on class trips, student performances, or sport events	The respondent is a member of the child's school Parent Association	No	201	118.13	23745.0	3444.0	0.001
		Yes*	42	140.50	5901.0		
		Total	243				
The teacher came to our home	The respondent is a member of the child's school Parent Association	No	203	120.14	24388.5	3682.5	0.001
		Yes*	44	141.81	6239.5		
		Total	247				
The teacher phoned to our home	The respondent is a member of the child's school Parent Association	No	202	117.30	23694.5	3191.5	0.00
		Yes*	44	151.97	6686.5		
		Total	246				
Asked families to inform the school about their children's needs	The respondent is a member of the child's school Parent Association	No	203	119.04	24165.0	3459.0	0.005
		Yes*	43	144.56	6216.0		
		Total	246				

*The Mann-Whitney comparison demonstrated a significant difference between this sub-group and the other.

Specifically, as demonstrated in Table 10, families that are members of the school's PA seem to be more frequently informed by teachers about their child's school achievement, receive more notices concerning their child, to experience more invitations for attending class and school morning events, to be asked more to offer their voluntary labour, to receive more phone calls from their child's teacher at home, and to experience more teachers' visits at their home. Finally, these families are more frequently asked to inform the school about their child's needs.

Future needs

Both teachers' and parents' responses to the question whether they would desire a further pursuit of the 23 specific practices, underwent a separate factor analysis. For the extraction of the factors, the rotated varimax analysis was used. Additionally, a mean score for each factor was calculated in order to understand more respondents' priorities for future changes.

The rotated varimax factor analysis of teachers' responses extracted five factors, explaining 54.07% of the variance. Table 11 presents the constitution of the five factors and the loadings received by each practice. It also presents the variance explained by each factor, the mean scores for each factor, and the respective Cronbach A reliability measure. As indicated by the table, the factor that received the highest mean was 'Parental training', which consisted of practices relating to teachers organising workshops for parents about educational and pedagogical issues. This grouping was followed by 'Class-work demonstration' practices, namely practices organised by teachers that aim at demonstrating to families the work done in their child's class. High on teachers' agenda were also practices that provide families with 'Oral information' about their child, and practices providing 'Written information'. The factor that included 'Non-professional-like' practices, received a rating suggesting that teachers in general would not like to pursue it more in comparison to their current practice.

In the families' case, the rotated varimax factor analysis of their responses extracted five factors, explaining 58.61% of the variance. Table 12 demonstrates these five factors and the respective statistics to the teachers' table. An investigation of the mean of these factors reveals that families are likely to desire a further pursuit of most groupings of practices. The suggested hierarchy of the different groupings though reveals differences from teachers' priorities. Families' main concern is to be provided with a 'Direct line of information' concerning their child. This grouping of practices extracted the highest mean, even though these practices were those included in the factors that received the lowest means in the teachers' case.

Simultaneously, families agreed with teachers about the need for further pursuing practices initiated by the school to train them or cultivating habits that would align their work with the work done at school. This 'Families' school enculturation' grouping of practices, received the second highest mean and was comprised by those practices that composed the two factors that received the highest mean in the teachers' case. Families were also found to embrace practices that could be classified as involving parents with 'Interaction opportunities', as also those practices that could be characterised as 'Non-professional like', thus differentiating them from teachers. The 'Oral information' factor received the lowest mean score, suggesting that it is currently succeeded at a high degree for most parents.

TABLE 11

Teachers' views towards future changes

Statement: **I would like to ...more during the next school-year in comparison to my current practice**	Oral information	Class-work demonstration	Non-professional like	Written information	Parental training
P2. Provide a parent with information on how children should study at home	.72				
P4. Inform a parent when we meet about the child's behaviour at school	.70				
P3. Inform a parent when we meet about the child's school achievement	.69				
P1. Provide a parent with information on how children should work at school	.68				
P18. Arrange a special meeting with a parent in order to discuss with her/him a matter concerning the child	.59				
P.8 Organise a lesson in my classroom for parents to attend it as viewers		.74			
P.11 Organise a morning event or gathering in my classroom at which I will invite the parents of my class		.70			
P. 21 Send to pupils' homes a classroom newsletter or a bulletin		.66			
P. 9 Organise a lesson in my classroom for parents to help during the lesson		.64			
P. 23 Survey parents for their perceptions about my class or school		.47			
P. 19 Visit a pupil's home			.70		
P. 20 Phone to a pupil's home			.67		
P. 16 Ask families to assist with student supervision on class trips, student performances, or sport events			.64		
P. 15 Ask families to assist with school or classroom maintenance			.62		
P. 6 Send to pupils' families of my class a notice/letter which will concern the families				.68	
P. 5 Send a report to pupils' homes informing them about their child's progress and needs				.61	
P. 22 Send to pupils' homes a report on the specific aims of a particular period to inform parents about what children are going to be taught during that period				.43	
P. 7 Send to pupils' homes notices concerning only their specific child				.43	
P .13 Organise a training workshop/seminar for the parents of my classroom on parenting skills					.86
P. 12 Organise a training workshop/seminar for the parents of my classroom on how parents should help their child with their schooling					.80
Mean*	1.38	1.41	1.00	1.33	1.57
Standard Deviation	.36	.54	.46	.39	.55
Reliability Alpha	.72	.74	.58	.61	.73
% of variance	21.63	11.93	7.16	6.91	6.42

*Scale: 0=Less than now/Not at all, 1=As now, 2=More than now

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TABLE 12

Families' views towards future changes

Statement: **My child's school/teacher should...more in comparison with what they do now**	Families' school enculturation	Interaction opportunities	Non-professional like	Oral information	Direct line o information
P. 2 Explain to me when we meet the way children should work at home	.78				
P. 1 Explain to me when we meet the way children should work at school	.77				
P. 13 Organise training workshops/seminars for the parents on parenting skills	.76				
P. 12 Organise training workshops for the parents on how they should help their child with their schooling	.68				
P. 21 Send to pupils' homes a report on the specific aims of a particular teaching period	.53				
P. 8 Invite me to attend a lesson in the child's class as a viewer	.50				
P. 9 Invite me to help during a lesson in the child's classroom	.49				
P. 15 Ask families to assist with school or classroom maintenance		.73			
P. 20 Send home a classroom newsletter or a bulletin		.70			
P. 22 Ask families to participate in committees which deal with issues that concern the school		.65			
P. 14 Organise events or gatherings during the afternoon or the evening		.60			
P. 24 Conduct research to explore families' perceptions of the school		.55			
P. 10 Organise morning events or gatherings for the class's parents in the child's classroom		.50			
P. 18 The teacher to come to our home to pay a visit			.72		
P. 17 Ask families to assist without being paid with the supervision of students who remain at school			.63		
P. 16 Ask families to assist with student supervision on class trips, student performances, or sport events			.57		
P. 11 Organise morning events or gatherings in the school for all school families			.50		
P. 4 To provide me with oral information on the child's behaviour at school				.83	
P. 3 To provide me with oral information on the child's school achievements				.82	
P. 19 The teacher to phone me					.78
P. 7 Send me home a notice concerning the child					.68
P. 5 Send me reports informing me about the child's progress and needs					.55
Mean*	1.65	1.54	1.23	1.19	1.66
Standard Deviation	.37	.41	.48	.36	.41
Reliability Alpha	.77	.71	.70	.79	.56
% of variance	27.74	11.78	6.92	6.71	5.43

*Scale: 0=Less than now/Not at all, 1=As now, 2=More than now

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V. Discussion

The main conclusion of the data analysis is that current practices trying to link primary schools in Cyprus and their pupils' homes are restricted, a finding that has also been demonstrated by previous smaller scale research in Cyprus (Georgiou, 1996; Phtiaka, 1996). This study also demonstrates, that current home-school links focus on families receiving oral information about their child's schooling, both after parental (e.g. when parents come to school to ask about their child's schooling) or teacher initiative (e.g. when teachers consider it necessary to provide parents with particular information regarding a family's child via a phone-call or a written notice). During these contacts, families appear to be additionally invited to inform the teacher about their child's and family realities and needs. Other practices that might bring families close with teachers are rarely established. Thus, current experimentation in most state primary schools in Cyprus appears to be still at the very first stage of 'dependence' in their relationships with their pupils' families according to Martin's et al. (1997) four-stage development model, where parents are passive in the face of teachers and appear as 'self-contained' schools (Macbeth, 1989). Only a few schools might be at the second stage of 'membership', where parents are consulted about changes and listened to. The nature of current priorities imply also, that teachers and families are oriented towards practices concerned mainly with the well-being of the parents' own child, namely to receive information about their own child, and not the collective well-being of the whole school, what can be considered, according to Munn (1993), as typical family 'involvement' practices.

At the same time, both teachers and families seem to express a desire for specific types of practices to be further pursued in the near future. Both agents though, set their own priorities. From the teachers' perspective, the main priority is the provision of family training opportunities relevant to general educational and pedagogical issues. They also appear apt to open their class in order to demonstrate class-work to pupils' families and 'enculturate' them in it, through family invitation to class sessions or events, the circulation of class bulletins, and the survey of parental perceptions about their class-work. Teachers clearly state, that they would not like to pursue more practices that might establish informal or non-professional-like links with families, such as visiting pupils' homes, calling their homes for contacting them, or asking families' voluntary labour. They appear also less willing to offer written than oral information to families about their child's schooling. From their viewpoint, families set as their initial priority more immediate and direct information about their own child, if possible via phone-calls and written documents or notices, thus rating as the most important practices those that teachers rated at the bottom of their priorities. Simultaneously, they agree with teachers that there is a need for further pursuing practices initiated by the schools that aim at their 'school' enculturation and practices that offer interaction opportunities.

It is clear that teachers are expressing a readiness to demonstrate their schoolwork to families by opening the class-doors to them. This readiness though is underpinned by their attitude that such an opening should aim at providing a first hand experience of school-work to families in order for the latter to align their school-help at home with what takes place at school. Hence, they combine this opening with training families on pedagogical and educational issues. Families appear to consent with this perspective and its rationale. Nonetheless, they stress the immediate need to secure

the well-being of their own child when in school, therefore they demand a direct line of information about their child, something that teachers are not ready to pursue, probably considering relevant practices as non-professional or as introducing overwhelming written work-load.

Overall, it can be claimed that the two agents' priorities for the future signify mild modes of parental engagement in the school. They are mainly concerned with being 'involved' in practices securing the well-being of each separate child, and not to engage in practices relating to the collective well-being of the whole school, what would have been a call for 'participation', as described by Tomlinson (1991) and Munn (1993).

Another significant conclusion of the current study is, that the nature and the extent of home-school relationships in Cyprus primary schools is likely to be related to a number of external variables. The SES of a school's catchment area seems to be one of these variables. It appears that teachers at schools located in high SES areas are engaged more with their pupils' families via providing them with more information regarding their child, utilising more their expertise, and organising for them training workshops. This is a finding that might be related to how families with different SES appear in the international literature as well (Finders and Lewis, 1994; Vincent, 1996; Reay, 1998; Lareau, 2000). Another variable is that of the school's location. It is likely that teachers employed at rural schools are more inviting than teachers at urban and semi-urban schools for families to come into to the class, organise parental training workshops, visit their pupils' homes, and ask parental voluntary labour. Similar were the findings relating to school's size, with teachers at small schools as opposed to teachers at large schools to be favouring a more general vivid link with families. These findings are once again similar to those elsewhere (Epstein, 1987), as also to the relevant Cyprus literature (Georgiou, 1998).

This study also concludes that differences between teachers' practices might be relevant to teachers' characteristics. Gender might be the most significant variable. Female teachers in this study were found to be more frequently and broadly involved with families than their male colleagues. Teachers' educational background was also revealed to signal significant differences between teachers. An indication was found that postgraduate degree holders are more involved than their colleagues are with families in the school in a number of ways.

The teaching context itself was also found to be related to the issue of this study. At lower grades, teachers demonstrated a tendency to communicate more often in writing with families than teachers at the upper grades. Additionally, as was found elsewhere (Epstein & Dauber, 1991), teachers of small classes are likely to link with their pupils' families differently than their colleagues of large classes.

From the family's side, being a member of the school's PA was found to introduce numerous differences in the ways a family was involved in its child's schooling. Families members of the PA, were more likely to be involved into school activities, to be offering their voluntary labour, to be receiving information and to have teachers calling and visiting their homes. This might suggest what other studies indicated (Georgiou, 1996; Phtiaka, 1996; Vincent, 1996; Reay, 1998), namely that these

families gain privileges for their own children due to their participation in the school's PA.

Finally, this study, indicates that the large proportion of fathers taking the initiative to respond to this survey might suggest the existence of a 'fatherhood movement' in Cyprus, as the one described by recent surveys in other western countries (Turner, 1997), thus leading to an increased 'male involvement' in Cypriot children's education. Nonetheless, this conclusion must be viewed sceptically though, for it might be that Cypriot fathers as fathers elsewhere (Blackmore, 1995; Vincent, 1996; Reay, 1998; Lareau, 2000) act as 'public personae' in issues relating to the sphere of home-school relations.

VI. Concluding suggestions

If the aim of schools in Cyprus is to establish stronger connections with families and optimally to develop a partnership in educating pupils, it is primarily required to change and reconstruct expectations and perceptions of the home and the school, in order to achieve a mutual understanding between them. This study revealed existing teacher and parental perspectives regarding current practice and future needs, which are prerequisites of such a change.

The readiness of both schools and families for the utility of a broader informing of the families on general educational and pedagogical issues and for the opening of the class and the school to families, as also teachers' readiness to facilitate these processes, demonstrated by this research, might be the starting point for any small or large scale innovative attempts at an official or unofficial level. The school, if broader versions of home-school liaisons are to occur, must be able to take this initiative, since it is the school in Cyprus that currently controls any process of change. Therefore, the teachers' role in such a case is of extreme importance in order to facilitate and encourage this process.

These attempts might take the form of studying the implementation of specific plans and investigating their impact on teachers and families, identifying obstacles to the effectiveness of the strategies and suggesting initiatives to better meet the needs of the participants. During any such attempt, the lack of homogeneity among schools', teachers' and families' profiles as described in this study, must be taken in serious consideration.

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